

Copenhagen talks: Lies, damn lies and emissions reductions pledges

by ESSF - Oscar Reyes
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A dazzling array of delegates from all over the world is in Copenhagen to hammer out a deal on tackling climate change. Oscar Reyes makes sense of the complex negotiations process.

What's at stake during the two weeks of climate negotiations in Copenhagen?

Oscar Reyes "The Copenhagen conference is sold as the means to achieve a new climate treaty, but it is clear that if there is an agreement it will take the form of some kind of political declaration, which has little legal force. Even those negotiations are in trouble, because the basis for such an agreement, in terms of emissions reduction commitments and finance from industrialised, wealthy countries, are not on the table.

The negotiations are also about the future of the Kyoto Protocol, which is often misreported as expiring in 2012. That's not the case. It's more a question of agreeing new commitments under that framework. The EU, Japan and other wealthy, industrialised countries want to see Kyoto dead because they want to see non-Annex I countries "mainly developing countries" commit to reduction targets too.

Most developing countries want to defend Kyoto and see new emissions reduction targets agreed by industrialised countries under this framework.

New proposals to expand carbon markets, and to put a price on forests, are also at the centre of the negotiations.

Are the Kyoto emissions reduction targets legally binding?

Yes. The Kyoto sets the target of 5.2% of emissions reductions by 2012. But there's a catch called "flexibility". Al Gore, leading US negotiator at the time, insisted the States would only accept the binding targets if there's flexibility in how these are met. The flexibility basically mean different kinds of carbon markets, which, in turn, insure none of the targets have to be met domestically.

The US or EU, for example, can claim that they are reducing emissions by investing in carbon offset projects abroad. In agreeing the targets, they agreed a loophole to avoid taking domestic action.

If the deal is legally binding, how was Canada allowed to ditch the Kyoto targets back in 2006?

Although the targets are binding, there's no international punitive sanction for states that don't fulfil their commitments.

Do you think there should be?

Yes, but that's not the biggest issue. The biggest issue is the fact that it's possible to meet the targets without actually doing anything. If you look at how successful a country is in reducing emissions, you have to look at what that country is doing domestically to meet its targets. Time and again we only witness countries actually increasing their emissions instead.

Who are the most important players in Copenhagen that will make or break the deal?

I think the deal is broken already. It's broken because the framework is broken. It sets up a system which says the reductions targets are all about numbers which are made into tradable emissions units. It's a way of translating the climate change problem into a language that neo-liberal economics understands. You cannot use the same tools that broke the system to fix it.

The UN climate conference is something between a trade negotiation and a trade fair. It resembles a trade fair because there is an awful lot of corporate lobbying going on. Many business and industry non-governmental organisations (BINGOs), basically corporations, are there trying to ensure a deal that works in their interest.

The other side of it is a trade negotiation, so it's really a game of power politics. The main split is between the wealthy countries, so-called Annex I countries, and the Global South. The Annex I countries bear the main responsibility for tackling climate change as they have historically emitted, and continue to emit, more than the countries in the Global South. Those countries, represented by the G77 plus China, can be a tough negotiating opponent if they stay together as a block. But the industrialised countries use various techniques to divide and conquer them.

Beyond that, tackling climate change requires not just an inter-governmental negotiation which is now firmly set up within the climate process framework. It should be about a shift of that framework, and that's where the social movements come in. So, it will be enormously important what happens in the protests and on the streets of Copenhagen.

We have all seen various CO2 reduction targets pledged ahead of the talks. But what do all these confusing numbers actually mean?

There are lies, damn lies and emissions reductions pledges, basically. The EU says it will cut its emissions by 30 per cent. What does that mean? Around half of the EU's emissions are counted as a part of the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS), which is the cap and trade scheme at the centre of the EU's climate policy. The other half cannot be counted as offsets. Unofficially, because the EU has allocated too many emissions permits in the second phase of the scheme which runs until 2012, these bogus permits that don't represent any reduction, can be carried over into the 3rd phase and make it far easier for the EU to meet its targets in the 3rd phase.

The US is no different. It talks about a 17 per cent reduction compared to its 2005 level. But that represents just a four per cent reduction compared with 1990 levels. Actually, a 100 per cent of these reductions could be achieved overseas if it passes its cap and trade legislation, which is currently being negotiated in Congress. Canada talks about 20 per cent reductions compared to 2006 by 2020, but its emissions have actually risen by 26 per cent since 1990. Australia talks of 25 per cent by 2020, while its emissions rose by about 30 per cent since 1990.

Once you get into the numbers and you look particularly at what these countries have done domestically to change their industrial processes, then the answer is - incredibly little.

What about China's offer to reduce emissions in proportion to the size of its economy? China confirmed this would be a domestic commitment.

China is also involved in carbon markets, but its target is indeed about domestic emissions. There are a lot of issues with it, but China's target is more ambitious than most of the industrialised countries. Both historically and currently, it emits far less than the industrialised countries.

It is true that China could do more, but there is also a tendency to single out China, the most populous country in the world. The US, in particular, plays this card and claim that China is now the biggest emitter. That may be true if we talk about the total, but if we look at per capita figures, China emits far less than the US and all of Western Europe.

We also have to take into account how these emissions are being produced and for whom. A lot of the emissions in China and other parts of the Global South are outsourced emissions produced by the outsourced industrial production from Annex I countries. The Tyndall Centre in the UK did a study which found that a quarter of China's emissions were for exports back to the industrialised, wealthy countries. Another recent study found that over 50 per cent of the increase in China's production between 2000 and 2005 come from an increase in products for export, as part of the liberal, free trade model. It's a complex culpability.

We hear a lot about different types of targets – rise in temperatures, percentage of reductions compared to different years and so on. Is there one that is most meaningful?

Some of the more recent studies recommend calculating actual volumes of pollution. I would say these are the clearer measures. James Hansen of NASA says we need to limit it to 750 millions of tonnes of CO₂ emitted into the atmosphere between 2000 and 2050. This would give us the best shot of limiting global warming to around 1.5 degrees Celsius.

What happens with that target if we continue business as usual?

Between 2000 and 2009 there were already about 330 million tonnes of CO₂ pumped into the atmosphere. So, in the 10-year period, we reached almost half of what we should be doing over the 50-year period.

But the science only takes us so far, it is the politics that is the problem. The climate change conference in Copenhagen isn't ultimately about science, in that respect. It is about saying there is a global responsibility that countries have to the globe. We are the ones that have largely caused the problem and, in order to tackle it, we need to fundamentally start changing how goods are produced, traded and distributed, as well as change our consumption patterns.

Who is going to pay for it all? The wealthy nations say they cannot give the money until the developing nations develop a concrete plan of what they are going to do with that money. Surely, that makes sense?

In terms of negotiations, they are shirking their obligation to make the money available. And then there is a parallel discussion of how that money will be spent. It is money that should be seen as a repayment of historical debt, climate debt. In that sense, it is not up to the Annex I countries to introduce conditionalities on that.

And there are already calls for this money to go via the World Bank. This means the funds would be distributed as

conditional loans. A lot of this money, such as World Bank's Clean Investment Funds (CIFs), would actually go to really dirty fossil fuel projects.

How would this happen?

In different ways. For example, the clean investment funds can be invested in clean or "cleaner" coal projects. This is an oxymoron, there is no such thing. In the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), there are already "supercritical coal plants", large-scale coal plants that are slightly less dirty than the really dirty coal-fired power stations but they still burn coal, which is one of the most energy intensive and climate-damaging ways to produce energy.

Another example is subsidising biomass burnt in power stations alongside coal. If you look more broadly it is driving deforestation which is going to cause far more emissions than the saving in the power station.

Speaking of deforestation, can you tell us briefly what REDD is?

The term REDD stands for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation. It is a scheme that claims the problem of deforestation is caused by the fact that there isn't an adequate price tag put on forests. Determining the price for standing forests would make it more valuable to keep them there rather than have them logged and deforested.

It sounds good in theory but it bears little or no relation to what actually happens in forests.

The real drivers of deforestation are structural. They are not individuals who are logging forests on a small scale. They are large, commercial, industrialised logging firms, they are plantations and they are mining interests often funded by international finance institutions and development banks to exploit forested areas. The problem with REDD is that the same companies would benefit from it.

People who are dependent upon the forests for their livelihood have a direct interest in protecting the forest but don't have land tenure rights. The REDD essentially stimulates land grabs and is further dispossessing the very people who could be best placed to protect forests.

There are more problems with REDD. One is that the definition of forests is so vague as to include plantations as well. This allows for forests to be cut down and then replanted with monoculture plantations, such as palm oil or soy, which in turn are labelled as forests.

There is a plan to include REDD in an offset market. In other words, what is counted as being forest protection in one place then gets sold, generates a series of credits, which are then sold back to industrialised countries to allow them to carry on polluting in other ways. Offsets are not reductions they are ways of shifting around the problem.

Let's go back to the issue of ecological debt. What does it mean?

Ecological debt refers to the fact that the disproportionate responsibility for climate change comes from the wealthy

industrialised countries. Those countries have acquired a lot of their wealth relying on the cheap exploitation of fossil fuels and natural resources, often drawn from the Global South. It's time they started cleaning up the mess. This means not only taking action domestically, but also creating financial mechanisms as a restitution for debt incurred.

When we talk about climate finance, it is not a question of aid payments or generous handouts, or similar. And it is not simply a question of finance. It is a debt in a broader sense: taking responsibility to stop the kind of destructive overexploitation of resources that are feeding climate change.

Although the Annex I countries have done the most to cause the problem, the people worst impacted tend to live in the Global South. Climate change will lead to more extreme and unpredictable weather, including floods in South-East Asia and droughts in Sub-Saharan Africa. In parts of South America, there could be serious water shortages. Some countries have less financial ability to tackle the issue. Crudely speaking, if you are in The Netherlands and the sea levels rise you can build a sea wall. In Bangladesh, for example, there are fewer financial resources or technical expertise available for a similar solution.

It looks like only false solutions to climate change are on the table in Copenhagen. Do you think no deal is better than a bad deal?

Any deal within the current framework will be a bad deal. It doesn't follow, however, that nothing should happen at the negotiations. There are a few interesting parts of the current agreement, in particular around technology transfer.

The negotiating text mentions the possibility of a global technology pool for climate change which would actually allow for the sharing of some green technologies without private patent protections. Brazil, China, India and other G77 countries support this idea. But there is a lot of lobbying from energy corporations and Annex I countries against it. In the last climate talks in Barcelona, Microsoft - with no direct interest in the climate negotiations - was there trying to stop the progressive suggestions on intellectual property. General Electric are also lobbying hard.

Climate change is a complex problem. It is a problem of how our societies function, about how political decisions are made, about how economies are structured. No one agreement is going to tackle all that. I would say that is why - although there are policies that can help tackle climate change - tackling climate change is, ultimately, a problem of political organisation and mobilisation for a different framework in how we produce goods and, more broadly, how to change the framework of power. There is not a short cut around that.

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